

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1899) *Poems (B, 2158-2167)*

Although Gerard Manley Hopkins was to take his own special career path, he too, like many of the male authors requiring our attention in the preceding entries, took the educational path of Oxford/Cambridge, into the presence of certain eminent professors and literary figures. Matthew Arnold, poet and humanist, was among the “great figures,” but the particular inspirations for Hopkins were two: Walter Pater, essayist and aesthete, a thinker for whom the artistic was always close to the moral; John Henry Newman, whose conversion to Roman Catholicism had much to do with Hopkins’ own similar move. (Hopkins entered the Catholic Church in 1866, and ultimately became a Jesuit priest.) In 1884 Hopkins was appointed Professor of Classics at University College in Dublin, Ireland.

Question: What led to Hopkins’ Conviction that Poetry and the Religious Vocation are Incompatible?

The present question is both simplistic and unanswerable, and yet goes right to the heart of Hopkins’ position as a creator. You will have noticed that Hopkins—with his sprung rhythm and inscape and instress theories—puts heavy stress on the manipulation of the oral/sensuous presentational side of poetry. (In his youth, Hopkins wrote in the vein of Keats, and you can see the aestheticism of, say, “Sleep and Poetry,” in Hopkins.) In addition, as you note in Norton (2159), Hopkins viewed the instress of inscape as a form of address to the created identity of the object of the poem, and thus a fairly direct access to Christ, the emblem and Lord of the created world for Hopkins. If you follow this issue of confrontation with Christ through its embodiment in a poem you will come on the source of conflict, for Hopkins, between his religious vocation and his artistic creativity. Inside himself he doubted that he should substitute an artistic simulation of the Christ encounter for the direct encounter in the Mass, the central act of his priesthood. In the latter part of his life, Hopkins abandoned poetry.

Comparative Literature:

1. To read Hopkins’ lyrics—think of “God’s Grandeur” or “As Kingfishers catch Fire”—is to pay close attention to the prosody that drives his thought, (Is Hopkins’ prosody itself a kind of embodied thought?) The challenge of this Comparative Literature entry is to review in mind the variety of lyric/poetic styles we have touched on in this course. Spenser, Sidney, Donne, Pope, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and now Hopkins. Does Hopkins ally with some particular voice in this group. Take “The Windhover.” Notice the effect of sprung rhythm, as Hopkins called it, in which there is a regular number of stressed syllables, but a highly variable number of unstressed, and some consequent breathless linking of one line to another. Do you see this pattern creating a novelty in English lyric? Or is Hopkins simply varying familiar patterns with a slight tweak?

2. In your Norton Anthology (2159) you note that Hopkins drew on Duns Scotus for the thinking behind *inscape*. Involved here is Hopkins’ belief about the kinds of disclosure poetry is capable of, as it allows the other it depicts to reveal its identity, and thereby to become, in its full createdness, the stamp of the Christ on it. From Plato (say in *The Ion*) to Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time* in the past century (1962), poets and philosophers have long debated the knowledge poetry seeks and gives; and Hopkins belongs to this tradition of debate. It might be instructive to contrast Hopkins, in this regard, with Spenser, Donne, or Wordsworth, each of whom clearly believes that poetry is more than expression, that it is also inquiry and statement about the world we live in.

Essay Questions

1. You will notice that Pope and Swift died only a few years before the birth of William Blake, in 1757. In with the new! If you were to mix up the works of these three writers in a pile, with no author identification tags on them, would you be able to tell which of the works were by Blake, and which by the other two?

How would you tell?

2. Review Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, and the *Preface* to them. Do you find in the early Wordsworth lyrics that simplicity of diction, that general hostility to poetic high style, which will be profoundly different from the "ornate" language of such as Dryden and Pope? Are Wordsworth's lyrics themselves "simple," in language or thought?

3. When you look at the poetry of Byron (d. 1824), Keats (d. 1821), and Hopkins (d. 1899) can you see some unifying factor(s) which marks the group as "19th century?" Please take this question back into our earlier units, and consider whether centuries seem useful categories for literary history, or whether perhaps "generations" seem more useful benchmarks, for understanding groups of writers?